

# Asexuality? It's Normal, Says Expert

By Justina Reichel  
Epoch Times Staff

Scientist Isaac Newton, writer Emily Brontë, fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, singer Morrissey, and comedian Janeane Garofalo all share an unlikely commonality: they were or are thought to be asexual.

An asexual, or "ace," is someone who doesn't experience sexual attraction or a desire for sex—an anomaly in today's sexually preoccupied world. The phenomenon has garnered increasing attention in recent years as human sexuality

experts and the media attempt to understand it.

For the last decade Anthony Bogaert, a psychology professor at Brock University in Ontario and a leading expert on asexuality, has been working to change the notion that being asexual is some kind of problem or disorder.

"It used to be the case that a lack of sexual interest, a lack of sex drive, or a lack of sexual attraction to other people was not necessarily construed as a problem—it was actually considered to be a virtue," Bogaert explained.

"That sort of changed in the past 20 years or so, when

the medical community became interested in looking for treatments, interventions related to human sexuality, and an absence of sex was starting to be construed as a problem."

Asexuals often have a life-long disinterest or little interest in sex, said Bogaert. He notes, however, that asexuality is not the same as being sexual but choosing to be celibate, or experiencing a temporary loss of sex drive from an illness or traumatic experience.

Bogaert jump-started international research in the field of asexuality with his 2004

paper "Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample," which suggested that at least one percent of people are asexual. In Canada, that would be nearly 350,000 people.

He has been an influential authority on the subject ever since, culminating in his latest book, "Understanding Asexuality," which characterizes asexuality as an emerging sexual orientation.

Bogaert's studies have also challenged popular attitudes and norms in today's sex-obsessed Western culture.

"When you start looking at it

you start to see sex for its particulars and some of its strange intricacies and manifestations. It also makes you start to think about, really, what is a disorder and what is not a disorder," he said.

Growing Awareness

Bogaert's work has been extremely well received by the global asexual community, many of whom see the professor as a champion of their cause. It has also likely been instrumental in changing attitudes in the academic and media communities. For example, last year's edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders differentiated asexuality from sexual disorders for the first time.

Amy de Vos, a 21-year-old photographer from the city of Kitchener in southern Ontario, has identified as an asexual since the age of 16. She said that although awareness about asexuality is growing, she still encounters many misconceptions.

"You just haven't found the right person—that's probably one of the most significant responses I've gotten," she said.

"It's kind of saying, 'you don't know who you are.' I am very aware of myself, so I don't like people telling me that."

De Vos coordinates meet-ups with other asexuals in her area, usually groups of 10-12, but said it isn't easy to meet others like her. She hopes to get married one day but doesn't want children, and plans to remain celibate.

"Sometimes you kind of wish that you weren't [asexual] so that you could find more people like you," she said.

But there's a positive side to asexuality, she adds—putting the focus on someone's character and compatibility when choosing a partner as opposed to animal attraction.

"Personally I think it's just more healthy to focus on those romantic aspects and someone's personality, as opposed to lust," she said, adding that she finds the modern obsession with sex "disconcerting."

"Especially if someone isn't that sexual, there's a lot of pressure on people to act."

According to the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the main online



Amy de Vos, a 21-year-old asexual from Kitchener, Ontario, says awareness about asexuality is growing, but many people still misunderstand it.

portal for the global asexual community, there are a wide range of relationships amongst asexuals: many enjoy romantic partnerships, others are satisfied with close-knit friendships, and some are happiest alone.

"Figuring out how to flirt, to be intimate, or to be monogamous in nonsexual relationships can be challenging, but free of sexual expectations we can form relationships in ways that are grounded in our individual needs and desires," the website states.

With increasing attention paid to asexuality in recent years, the community appears to be expanding. Several dating websites for asexuals have cropped up, and a documentary examining asexuality is currently available on Netflix.

One of the largest-ever gatherings for asexuals will be held in Toronto on June 28 at the 2014 WorldPride Asexual Conference, featuring international visitors including the founders of AVEN.

This exposure is important, said Bogaert, because the more asexuality comes into mainstream consciousness, the more "closeted" asexuals will be able to identify it in themselves and avoid an identity crisis.

"If you don't have a label for yourself and you don't know what this is you can't really 'come out,' so to speak, and be part of an 'out' minority and be counted," he said.

"If you don't have a label for it people just assume they're part of some other group."



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## Yoga Can Lower Fatigue, Inflammation in Breast Cancer Survivors

Yoga continued from B5

### Study

Each yoga group included between four and 20 women who practiced the same poses during 90-minute sessions twice a week. Researchers encouraged the women to practice at home, as well; participants logged their total weekly practice time.

Immediately after the active phase of the trial ended, the women in the yoga group reported, on average, a 41 percent drop in fatigue and a 12 percent higher vitality score compared to the non-yoga group.

To gauge the participants' inflammation levels, the scientists measured the activation of three proteins in the blood that are markers of inflammation—called pro-inflammatory cytokines. They generated the protein activity by injecting a compound that stimulated an immune response. The proteins are interleukin-6 (IL-6), interleukin-1 beta (IL-1B) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF- $\alpha$ ).

### Surprise Finding

At the three-month point immediately after the yoga sessions ended, all three pro-inflammatory cytokine levels were lower, on average, in the yoga group compared to the non-yoga group: TNF- $\alpha$  by 10 percent, IL-6 by 11 percent and IL-1B by 15 percent.

"We were really surprised by the data because some more recent studies on exercise have suggested that exercise interventions may not necessarily lower inflammation unless people are substantially overweight or have metabolic problems," Kiecolt-Glaser said. "In this group, the women didn't lose weight, but we saw really marked reductions in inflammation. So this was a particularly striking finding biologically."

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